

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
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R 232156Z JAN 76

FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9057

INFO AMCONSUL LENINGRAD

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 1066

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: CVIS, OGEN, UR, PINT, SREF

SUBJECT: SOVIET LIBERALIZATION OF EXIT VISA PROCEDURES

REF: STATE 013648, MOSCOW 0471, MOSCOW 1000, MOSCOW 861,
MOSCOW 663

1. SUMMARY. SOVIET EMIGRATION PRACTICES AND PROCEDURES APPEAR TO BE CHANGING SIGNIFICANTLY IN SEVERAL AREAS, INCLUDING SOME COVERED BY TOTH ARTICLE. IN SOME CASES, MODIFICATIONS INVOLVE TANGIBLE DEPARTURES FROM PREVIOUS PRACTICE WHILE IN OTHERS THEY APPEAR TO BE AIMED AT CLARIFYING EXISTING AMBIGUOUS EMIGRATION PRACTICES. WHILE SOVIETS MAY WELL BE IMPLEMENTING THESE CHANGES IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH A RECORD OF COMPLIANCE ON MANY BASKET III ITEMS, CHANGES REPRESENT AT LEAST A SIGNIFICANT PROCEDURAL MODIFICATION OF SOVIET EMIGRATION PRACTICE, WHATEVER THE MOTIVATION. EMBASSY

CONTINUES TO SEEK DETAILS OF CHANGES IN SOVIET EMIGRATION POLICY, INCLUDING CONFIRMATION OF THOSE MENTIONED IN THE TOTH ARTICLE. END SUMMARY.

2. AS REPORTED MOSCOW 0471, THE 100 RUBLES REDUCTION IN FEE CHARGED FOR FOREIGN TRAVEL DOCUMENTS HAS BEEN IN EFFECT SINCE JANUARY 1. THE FEE REDUCTION HAS BEEN UNIFORMLY APPLIED, INCLUDING TO SOVIET JEWS EMIGRATING TO ISRAEL (MOSCOW 1000). THE TOTAL COST OF EMIGRATION DOCUMENTS IS NOW 300 RUBLES (APPLICATION FEE OF 40 RUBLES PLUS PASSPORT FEE OF 260 RUBLES)
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FOR EMIGRANTS TO ALL NON-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES. IN ADDITION,

AS DEPARTMENT IS AWARE, EMIGRANTS TO ISRAEL MUST ALSO RENOUNCE SOVIET CITIZENSHIP AT A COST OF 500 RUBLES.

3. EMBASSY HAS NOT YET BEEN ABLE TO CONFIRM THAT WOULD-BE EMIGRANTS NO LONGER NEED SUBMIT REFERENCES (KHARAKTERISTIKI) SIGNED BY THE APPLICANT'S WORK SUPERVISOR, TRADE UNION CHIEF, AND PARTY CHIEF AT HIS PLACE OF WORK. OVIR REPRESENTATIVE DID TELL ONE RECENT APPLICANT, HOWEVER, THAT THE PERIOD OF VALIDITY FOR REQUIRED REFERENCES HAS NOW BEEN EXTENDED TO ONE YEAR FROM THE PREVIOUS PERIOD OF SIX MONTHS. CONSOFFS JANUARY 21 INQUIRED OF MFA OFFICIAL G.A. BOSIKOV WHETHER THE KHARAKTERISTIKA REQUIREMENT HAS BEEN DROPPED. BOSIKOV REPLIED THAT HE WAS NOT AWARE OF SUCH A CHANGE BUT CLAIMED THAT IT MAY HAVE TAKEN PLACE WITHOUT HIS KNOWLEDGE SINCE SUCH POLICIES ARE RESPONSIBILITY OF MVD. HE FURTHER STATED THAT THERE MAY WELL BE CHANGES OF "INTERNAL PROCEDURES," WHICH WOULD NOT NECESSARILY BE PUBLISHED.

4. LOCAL OVIRS HAVE ALWAYS PLAYED A CRUCIAL, IF AMBIGUOUSLY DEFINED, ROLE IN THE SOVIET EMIGRATION BUREAUCRACY AND WE ARE NOT CERTAIN THAT TOTH'S STATEMENT RE DECISION MAKING PRIMACY OF LOCAL OVIR REPRESENTS CHANGE. IN AT LEAST ONE RECENT CASE, SOVIET OFFICIALS REAFFIRMED THE PRIMARY ROLE OF OVIR IN A LONG-STANDING AND SENSITIVE EMIGRATION CASE. IRINA MCLELLAN RECENTLY VISITED THE OFFICES OF THE PRESIDUM OF THE SUPREME SOVIET AND THE PREPARATORY COMMISSION OF THE PARTY CONGRESS TO REQUEST A HIGH LEVEL REVIEW OF HER CASE. OFFICIALS OF BOTH ORGANIZATIONS REFERRED HER TO OVIR, SAYING THAT OFFICE HAD COMPLETE AUTHORITY TO DECIDE HER CASE.

5. HIGHER OVIR REVIEWS OF REFUSALS HAVE IN THE PAST BEEN CONDUCTED AT IRREGULAR INTERVALS IN MANY CASES, ALTHOUGH THE PRESCRIBED INTERVAL OF ONE YEAR WAS OFTEN CITED BY SOVIET OFFICIALS. THE SIX-MONTH INTERVAL, HOWEVER, WAS REPORTEDLY MENTIONED BY ALL-UNION OVIR CHIEF OBIDIN IN A RECENT INTERVIEW WITH IRINA MCLELLAN. DURING ABOVE-MENTIONED CONVERSATION WITH MFA OFFICIAL BOSIKOV, CONOFFS INQUIRED WHETHER REFUSALS ARE NOW REVIEWED AFTER SIX MONTHS RATHER THAN ONE YEAR. HE REPLIED THAT THE PERIOD BETWEEN REVIEWS OF EMIGRATION REFUSALS WAS AN INTERNAL OPERATING PROCEDURE OF MVD ABOUT WHICH HE HAD NO PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE. HE MAINTAINED, CONFIDENTIAL

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HOWEVER, THAT MANY DIFFICULT CASES ARE NOW BEING REVIEWED AND THAT MANY PERSONS PREVIOUSLY REFUSED WILL BE ALLOWED TO EMIGRATE.

6. THE GROUNDS FOR REFUSAL MENTIONED IN THE TOTH ARTICLE HAVE OFTEN BEEN CITED BY OVIR OFFICIALS IN INTERVIEWS WITH APPLICANTS. EMBASSY IS NOT AWARE OF ANY PUBLIC SOVIET ENUMERATION OF THESE REASONS AS AUTHORITATIVE AND EXCLUSIVE. NETHERLANDS

EMBASSY OFFICER RESPONSIBLE FOR ISSUANCE OF ISRAELI ENTRY VISAS TO SOVIET JEWS, HOWEVER, RECENTLY REMARKED THAT OVIR AUTHORITIES ARE NOW MORE OFTEN PROVIDING EXPLICIT REASONS FOR REFUSALS (MOSCOW 1000.)

7. IN ADDITION TO CHANGES REPORTED IN TOTH ARTICLE, SOVIET AUTHORITIES HAVE TAKEN AT LEAST TWO OTHER RECENT STEPS TO LIBERALIZE EMIGRATION PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES. AS REPORTED MOSCOW 0471, EMIGRANTS FROM SOVIET ARMENIA NOW FIND IT EASIER TO HAVE THE YEREVAN OVIR CHANGE THE DESTINATION IN THEIR FOREIGN TRAVEL PASSPORT FROM A COUNTRY WHICH WILL NOT ACCEPT THEM, SUCH AS LEBANON, TO THE US. SOVIET AUTHORITIES HAVE ALSO PUBLISHED (IN THE JANUARY 7 ISSUE OF VEDOMOSTI USSR) REGULATION OF DECEMBER 23 THAT, IN CASES WHERE EXIT PERMISSION IS REFUSED, THE FORTY RUBLE APPLICATION FEE WILL BE RETURNED WITHOUT DELAY (MOSCOW 861). DEPARTMENT MAY RECALL THAT DURING HIS MEETING WITH CONGRESSMAN DRINAN LAST SUMMER, ALL-UNION OVIR CHIEF OBIDIN STATED THAT THIS WOULD BE DONE.

8. SOME OF THESE MODIFICATIONS IN SOVIET EMIGRATION PRACTICES, SUCH AS THE 100 RUBLE REDUCTION OF FEES, ARE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS. WE HAVE NO CURRENT EVIDENCE THAT PROGRESSIVE REDUCTIONS ARE PLANNED OR THAT THE DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICE REQUIRING EMIGRANTS TO ISRAEL TO RENOUNCE SOVIET CITIZENSHIP WILL BE DROPPED.

9. OTHER RECENT CHANGES MAY NOT BE ENTIRELY BENEFICIAL TO PROSPECTIVE EMIGRANTS. FOR EXAMPLE, REAFFIRMATION OF THE DECISION-MAKING POWER OF THE LOCAL OVIR MAY BENEFIT APPLICANTS IN AREAS SUCH AS ARMENIA, WHERE THE LOCAL ADMINISTRATION APPEARS WELL DISPOSED TO THEIR DEPARTURE, WHILE JEWS DESIRING TO EMIGRATE MAY ENCOUNTER INCREASED DIFFICULTIES IF THEIR CASES ARE DECIDED BY LOCAL OVIRS IN AREAS WHERE ANTI-SEMITISM IS STRONG. CONFIDENTIAL

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10. ALTHOUGH NO OFFICIAL RATIONALE FOR THESE SPECIFIC CHANGES HAS BEEN ARTICULATED, THE SOVIETS MAY INTEND TO CLAIM COMPLIANCE WITH AT LEAST SOME PROVISIONS OF CSCE (MOSCOW 0663). ESTABLISHMENT OF SUCH A RECORD MIGHT ENABLE THE SOVIETS TO DEFLECT WESTERN CRITICISM ON BASKET III ISSUES WHILE PRESSING THE WEST TO MATCH SOVIET EFFORTS WITH COMPARABLE MOVEMENT ON BASKET II. WHATEVER THE SOVIET MOTIVATION, THESE CHANGES REPRESENT AT LEAST A POSITIVE PROCEDURAL MODIFICATION OF SOVIET EMIGRATION PRACTICE. IT IS, HOWEVER, STILL TOO EARLY TO TELL WHETHER THE PROCEDURAL LIBERALIZATION OF EMIGRATION NOW UNDERWAY WILL MAKE EMIGRATION EASIER FOR A SUBSTANTIALLY GREATER NUMBER OF SOVIET CITIZENS. STOESSEL

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PRESS COMMENTS, POLICIES, EXIT VISAS, EMIGRANTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 23 JAN 1976
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: coburnhl
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976MOSCOW01066
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760027-0307
From: MOSCOW
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760128/aaaaaycr.tel
Line Count: 168
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: 76 STATE 13648, 76 MOSCOW 471, 76 MOSCOW 1000, 76 MOSCOW 861
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: coburnhl
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 MAY 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <05 MAY 2004 by BoyleJA>; APPROVED <01 SEP 2004 by coburnhl>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SOVIET LIBERALIZATION OF EXIT VISA PROCEDURES
TAGS: CVIS, OGEN, PINT, SREF, UR
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006